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The Library Board and Accessible Services

This Trustee Essential covers:

- *How to make your library services accessible to all members of the community*
- *Your responsibility in regard to implementing ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) requirements for accessible services*

Role of the board / role of the director

The board is the governing body for the library and, as such, has a responsibility to assure that the library and its policies are in compliance with all laws, including the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The section of the ADA that will be discussed in this *Trustee Essential* requires that all library services must be accessible to people with disabilities. The director has the responsibility to stay abreast of current issues related to making services accessible and to present the options to the board for its consideration.

ADA background on accessible services

The ADA, passed in 1990, was written to ensure that people who had disabilities would not be denied access to the services and buildings that everyone else had access to.

The requirement to provide accessible services is not dependent on a building's being accessible. Public library services must be made available in some way if the building is not accessible. The best way to provide access to most library services is to have an accessible building. But some accommodations can and must be made until such time as the building is remodeled or a new building is constructed. Provision of certain services may require accommodations even if the building is accessible.

Types of disabilities that may require accommodations to make library services accessible

Mobility impairments

People who use wheelchairs, crutches, and/or braces may have difficulty accessing library services, even if they can get into the building. Other people may also need accommodations, if they have limited ability to walk, or to reach, or grasp, or turn pages. If the building itself is not accessible, the problem of providing access to services is more complicated. Some libraries offer services by phone and make selections for their patrons and then either bring the materials out to the people who cannot come into the building or else deliver them to their homes. Some libraries offer a drive-up window with customized service to make pickup and delivery easier for people with disabilities—and provide a great convenience to the general public. Many libraries offer outreach services to nursing homes. One helpful service public libraries can provide is to refer people with severe mobility limitations to the Wisconsin Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped,

from which they can borrow recorded materials and automatic page turners if they are unable to hold a book or turn pages.

Tables and seating areas should be designed so those patrons who use wheelchairs have adequate access to them. Computer workstations can be adapted in several ways to make use of computers easier for people who use wheelchairs. The table must accommodate wheelchairs in terms of height and legroom under it. A long cord can be added to the keyboard so it can be lifted down onto the tray of a wheelchair. A trackball can be added as an alternative to a mouse, or in addition to one. Trackballs are easier for some people to manipulate. The service desk is required to have at least one section that is no higher than 36 inches. Service dogs (certified dogs should be wearing a collar or backpack that identifies them as trained service companions) must be allowed to accompany their owners in public buildings.

All library patrons, including those who have any type of disability, should be welcomed, and staff should try to talk directly to them, rather than to friends or family who may be with them. Children with physical disabilities should be welcomed at programs that are developmentally appropriate for them. Accommodations at story hours or other programs should be made to help every child feel comfortable, accepted, and an active participant in the program.

The library collection should include resource materials on physical disabilities. Some collections include toys adapted for children with mobility impairments. Library publicity should routinely include a phone number (and a TDD number if available) to call if accommodations are needed.

Blindness and vision impairments

Public libraries frequently act as an intermediary in connecting people who are blind with the Wisconsin Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, where they can receive audio recordings of books and braille materials. Computer workstations can be adapted with software that reads the text aloud. This feature would also be very helpful to people with learning disabilities, adults who are just starting to learn to read, and people who are learning English as a second language. The library's web page can follow universal design recommendations, so that it can be read easily by people who use a screen reader.

The library can purchase or borrow descriptive videos (which describe the action in a video when there is no dialog). Library materials in braille and/or on tape can be added to the collection. The library's regular collection of audiocassettes, CDs, computer software and books on tape can be made accessible to patrons who are blind if clear braille labels are added. Braillist organizations can do this for the library at very little cost. Large-print materials should be available for both adult and child patrons who have some vision but can more easily read large-print. Library brochures and fliers should be routinely printed in large print, or large print versions should be made available. Audio materials may also be of interest to patrons who have limited vision. The library can also, upon request, be a referral point to the Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Janesville, especially if the patron is a child.

Computer workstations can easily be adapted for large print, often using the features built into the standard computer, although larger monitors also help. The ability to change the background colors and contrasts is also very helpful. Many libraries offer in-house

magnifiers; some allow them to be checked out. An intensely bright table or floor lamp that can be moved around in the library is a very useful accommodation. Some libraries have machines that can enlarge photos or text. Some have machines that can read text out loud. Computer scanners can also be used to scan and then enlarge text and images. Photocopy machines can be used to enlarge pages of text for people who use large print. Some libraries have adapted toys for children who are blind or who have severe vision impairments.

Deafness and hearing impairments

As with many disabilities, the biggest barrier to service for people who are deaf is often other people's attitude. People who are deaf may use sign language, read lips, use an interpreter, write their communication, or use a combination of all of these when they want to access public library services. Service desk staff need training to understand how best to offer services to people who are deaf or who have a significant hearing loss. Patrons should be allowed to decide individually how they want to communicate, and the staff should try to work with each patron to meet his or her needs.

Programs for both adults and children and all public meetings should routinely include sound amplification by the use of a microphone. This single accommodation is typically enough to meet the needs of most people who are hearing impaired. A closed sound system (which amplifies the sound only for the person using the equipment) can also be used. Libraries must provide an interpreter for any programs or meetings when one is requested.

It is difficult for people who use a Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD or TTY) to call for reference service unless the reference desk has access to a TDD. Signs should be posted indicating the library has a TDD, and people who need to use one should be allowed to use it. Often a hearing family member needs to call home to communicate with someone who may be using a TDD, and having one at the library makes this much easier. Some libraries use the state Relay Service for the Deaf as an alternative to having a TDD. That is acceptable as long as the staff is trained to use the service and the number is readily available at all service desks.

Libraries should routinely flash their lights when announcements are made, especially for emergency announcements, and to warn patrons that the library is closing soon. Flashing lights is a technique commonly used with people who are deaf to get their attention. It alerts the patron that something important is happening. Adaptations can be made in story hours to help a child who is deaf or hearing-impaired get more out of the program. Some libraries circulate special toys that light up or vibrate for children who are deaf. Libraries often order open- and closed-captioned videos. All libraries should have current information on deafness and hearing loss in their collections.

Developmental delays / brain injury / mental illness

People who have a developmental delay, have suffered a brain injury, or have emotional or mental illness may need accommodations when they are in the library. Staff should be trained to treat all patrons with respect, to enforce all rules fairly, and to be tolerant of behavior that may be unusual but not threatening or may be involuntary. Staff should strive to make all patrons feel welcome in the library.

Age restrictions for programs are sometimes relaxed for people who have developmental delays and for whom the programs might be appropriate for their mental age rather than their

chronological age. Extra assistance and reminders are sometimes needed when patrons with developmental or emotional disabilities attend programs and meetings at the library. The library can be an important resource for families who have a member with a developmental delay, a brain injury, or an emotional illness. More importantly, the public library has a role in making the family and individual feel accepted and a part of the larger community. Being at a public library is a very "normalizing" experience.

Discussion Questions:

1. What would the impact be on the library if it could increase its services to about ten percent more of the community who are not currently being served? (Ten percent is the general estimate of people with disabilities in most communities.)

2. If people in wheelchairs, or who are blind, or deaf, or have developmental disabilities are not currently using the library, what barriers do you think the library has to overcome so that these people become library patrons?

3. Make a list of at least five things that have no new cost the library could do to make its services accessible.

Sources of Additional Information:

The DLTCL Special Needs Web Page at http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dltcl/pld/special.html has links to resources and agencies serving people with various types of disabilities.

Wisconsin Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, 813 West Wells Street, Milwaukee, WI 53233, 414-286-3010

Wisconsin Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired, 1700 W. State Street, Janesville, WI 53546, 800-758-6161

Wisconsin School for the Deaf and Educational Service Center for Deaf and Hearing Impaired, 309 W. Walworth Avenue, Delavan, WI 53115, 262-740-2066

Great Lakes DBTAC, University of Illinois–Chicago, 1640 West Roosevelt Road, Chicago, IL 60608, (312) 413-1407, http://www.adagreatlakes.org

Your library system staff (see *Trustee Tool B: Library System Map and Contact Information*)

Division for Libraries, Technology, and Community Learning staff (see *Trustee Tool C* for contact information)

This Trustee Essential provides only a general outline of the law and should not be construed as legal advice in individual or specific cases where additional facts might support a different or more qualified conclusion.